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ABSTRACT

After reviewing definitions of general education and statements regarding its importance found in the literature, this paper presents observations to be considered in updating or developing general education programs. It is observed that many disciplines have developed excessive departmentalization; that administrators tend to view general education as insignificant; that material should be presented that pertains directly to the lives of the students; that there should not be a separate general education faculty; that courses should be adjusted to different ability levels; and that these courses usually do not prepare students for advanced courses. New emphases in general education instruction include: stressing inquiry, greater flexibility for the teacher, popularity of independent study and study abroad, and the negative effects of greater inducements for specialized scholarship for younger teachers. The general education teacher should attempt to help his students develop: (1) a sense of responsibility for their own learning; (2) an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses; and (3) an understanding of what college is and what it means to do scholarly work. (MB)

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GENERAL EDUCATION! NOT AGAIN?

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Introduction

It has been said that each generation must learn for itself the lessons of the past. Educators are not exempt from this reality as it relates to the need and purpose of general education.

This is not a "position" paper. The author neither defends nor rejects the statements contained in this report. It has been prepared to develop an understanding of general education. What it is, what it is not, and what has and is being said about this important aspect of curriculum development. (In a weak moment it must be confessed that many personal biases are reflected.)

A few years ago, at a conference attended by approximately twenty educators from as many colleges who were judged to be leaders in the field of general education, no one was willing to give a concise definition of the term "general education". No doubt, this was because the term relates to, in the broader concept, a movement against the trend to the disjointment of curriculum as well as to the exclusive specialization or professionalism of subject matter.

What is General Education?

Russel Cooper, in General Education, An Account and Appraisal, expresses the thought that general education programs all seek to identify, among the vast ranges of human knowledge, those fundamentals essential to the well being of cultivated men. These essential ideas must then be brought together in systematic fashion in order that the student will be motivated to comprehend and apply them in his personal living.

Cooper goes on to say that general education is general in that it is designed for all people in all academic disciplines. It is concerned with the student's total development, his values and aesthetic sensitivity as well as his purely intellectual values. Finally, general education courses are not thought to be preparatory to more advanced studies in any given speciality nor as terminal. Rather, such courses are "independent and significant in themselves" although it is hoped they will "excite student interest and promote habits of independent reading . . . throughout life."

Earl J. McGrath, in his book, Toward General Education, defines general education as "that which prepares the young for the common life of their time and their kind."

Robert B. Kamm, Dean of College of Arts and Sciences, Oklahoma State University (1962), states, "General education has been defined as an attempt to adapt liberal education to serve the varying needs of the masses. In the presence of widely differing talents, interests, and ability levels among students on our campuses, the general education program is designed to serve needs in addition to those served by the more traditional content-centered approach of the liberal arts. General education is concerned with development in its various aspects, with emphasis on behavior and social usefulness, and on aesthetic and spiritual maturity, as well as on intellectual development."

Philip H. Rhinelander, Professor of Philosphy, Stanford University (1963), states, "Specialization often tends toward atomism of knowledge. Specialism becomes dangerous when and if the boundaries of one's special field become also the boundaries of one's intellectual horizon. The proper function of general education is to impel the student, whose interests are rooted in a particular field, to look beyond his own field and to consider how other areas and other points of view are related to his own."

In the broadest sense, general education has always been the basis of American educational philosophy. Some educators consider general and liberal education one and the same. Generally a distinction is made between the two. Liberal education in the face of rapidly expanding knowledge has been charged with emphasizing facts and subject matter while general education supposedly is concerned with ideas and people. Stated differently liberal education is oriented to the development of the intellect while general education is concerned with the whole personality as related to society.

From an extreme point of view general education attempts to prevent the type of specialization that would teach an individual to say "horse" in seven languages but would not safeguard him from "saddling up" a cow. Liberal education seems to assume that improved behavior of individuals will come with knowledge and understanding of the liberal arts, whereas the purposes of general education are stated in terms of active participation and behavior of the student.

Why General Education Today?

"In a time of advanced technology when specialized training is necessary for national survival and individual employment, why are you expending energy on the nebulous whimsy of general education?"

The above question was addressed to B. Lamar Johnson several years ago by a junior college instructor. Dr. Johnson thought the question was important and not only sent a personal reply to the instructor but also sent the instructor's question for comment to a select group of educators and leaders throughout the nation. Some of the replies are as follows:

"The question is almost like asking, Why do we need houses, schools, and churches in an age when we have factories?" (Alvin C. Eurich, at the time President of the State University of New York.)

Frederick L. Allen, then the editor of Harper's Magazine, "It is one of the delusions of our time that the specialist is tops, even if he is otherwise an ignoramus."

Mark Starr, educational director of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, stressed international understanding. "Even in world conflict we have won our battles by technical superiority and lost them because we did not have the general education and the knowledge to make the peace successfully. We win on the battlefields and lose in the rice fields because we do not understand the ways of life and ideas of other peoples."

J. R. Killian, Jr., of Massachusetts Institute of Technology. " . . . . without an adequate cultural background, a technical specialist is no longer qualified for leadership in his own field."

Paul Hoffman "I hold the deep conviction that an individual without general education is like a tree with branches but without roots."

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Edmund W. Sinnott (Yale): "Man, not matter, is the chief problem of the world today. If we train his mind to master material things without at the same time enlarging his spirit so that he may appreciate the value of immaterial ones and thus become master of himself, he is but half a man. The greatest peril now is not from lack of education, but from one-sided, partly educated men. Only whole men can save the world today."

There are many reasons for the resurging interest in general education. Dissatisfaction with an unbalanced program for graduation or from free election of students has led to requirements of general education for some portion of the student's program.

More important is the democratization of higher education with increasing enrollments which invariably increase the range of majors and minors offered and widens the interest and academic, cultural and social ability of students. It is difficult at times to determine which expands first and fastest, the students or the curricular offerings. The development of the open door college has been and will be an even greater factor in this trend.

Whether we like it or not the high drop-out rate in college is going to force a re-evaluation of the traditional curriculum. There are many reasons why pupils do not finish college but failure or marginal performance because of inability or low motivation is by far the largest single cause. The point of view that drop-outs, in most cases, are not academically fit for college in the first place does not justify a lack of concern for the need of a careful evaluation of the college program. If for no other reason the educator must be aware of and concerned about the impact of the lack of success on the student who was considered acceptable for admission to the institution.

Updating General Education Courses

Education is out of tune with the times when there is confusion concerning the need for teaching skill, scholarship, conformity of educators to unsupported academic prejudices, and mistakes in the organization of and for education. The following observations are worthy of consideration in the updating or development of general education courses.

1. Many disciplines have developed excessive departmentalization. Proliferation has resulted -- partly due to knowledge explosion.

2. Too much "preoccupation", especially in the social and behavioral sciences, plus the humanities and related offerings, has resulted in the development of a pseudo-science. There is over emphasis on definitions and semantics and failure to acknowledge that general education is an art not a science.

3. The administrative staff, to say nothing of the faculty, too often does not and will not consider general education offerings significant to the education of the college student. Without support at all levels, the program will fail.

4. General education courses are often required courses attended by students who do not know why they are there and taught by teachers by assignment, not dedication. Consider the background of both the teacher and the student in developing the course.

5. Great emphasis has been and must be placed on American institutions and social customs -- and necessarily so. As the world becomes smaller and as we train students for world leadership and understanding a global outlook is essential.

6. As much as possible, particularly in the social sciences, material should be presented that pertains directly to the lives of students. History does not necessarily repeat itself. Too often, the course covers too much rather than too little and too often information is presented in a sequential rather than cause-and-effect manner.

7. General education courses must be experimental in their approach to subject matter. They might also be experimental in their approach to structure. Higher education could learn much about superior methods of teaching by observing the competent elementary teacher.

8. It is folly to assume that the instructor in general education must be an expert in all fields of related disciplines but he can demonstrate how a whole man approaches a whole problem. (Team teaching provides opportunity for both teacher and student growth.)

9. There should not be a separate general education faculty. Those who teach general education courses should be members of subject matter departments and should be teaching also in their subject matter field. Better communication and understanding results from this approach and faculty morale should be higher when threat of isolation is minimized.

10. General education courses should be adjusted to different levels of abilities with the objectives and goals of the course in mind and recognizing the need for certain minimum standards.

11. The more knowledge expands, the greater the need for general education. It is increasingly important that people learn to interpret and understand broad principles and to apply them to ever-increasing masses of factual data.

12. The college must provide a program, particularily for terminal students, that is not dictated by or beholden to another college.

13. Within a general framework there should be a great deal of flexibility and variety in the combinations and patterns of courses students may elect to satisfy requirements. There is serious question regarding the practice of offering only one course that everyone must take.

14. There is a great deal of flexibility, variety and difficulty in the combinations and patterns that students may elect to satisfy degree requirements in any institution of higher learning. Junior colleges, particularily, must recognize that theirs is a particularily heterogeneous population and face their responsibilities squarely by providing a rich, broad curriculum for both the terminal and transfer students.

15. While it is considered easier to plan general education courses in some areas, (social sciences as contrasted to the natural sciences) each generally recognized academic area can, with proper teaching, be a subject of general education.

16. A professional course in one area, say literature, properly taught, could well be considered a general education course in another area, for example, mathematics.

17. General education courses often discard the single textbook in favor of several books and extensive reading lists. Librarians and faculty must work together with increasing awareness of the importance of the library to the student.

18. General education courses do not usually aim to prepare students for advanced courses.

What is the New Emphasis or Direction for Teaching in General Education?

1. To stress inquiry is the teaching method receiving much emphasis today. It is to be hoped that the professor no longer "informs" the student of facts that can be obtained by reading. The professor attempts to supply direction to information which is new, which evolves from the teacher's experiences, or which is likely to escape the student's attention.

2. There is a disposition to permit greater flexibility for the scholar and teacher. Together the scholars and teachers develop courses designed to provide what they believe to be most needed by the student.

3. Manifestations of a new direction and emphasis in general education are found in the following popular concepts:

   a. Independent study; particularily in honors programs for lower division students.

   b. Proficiency examinations and credit by examination.

   c. Increasing use of libraries and the development of learning resource centers.

   d. Study abroad.

4. The teacher plays a vital part in the process of general as well as all education. The teacher is at his best, and this is what general education is about, when he is the best source and tool which the student uses in growing toward responsibility, self-reliance and independence for his own learning.

5. One of the greatest threats to general education has been the trend toward greater rewards and other inducements for specialized scholarship for younger scholar-teachers. This attracts to special fields to the exclusion of general education.

6. Philip H. Rhinelander, Professor of Philosophy, Stanford University (1963), stated, "Does general education imply or exclude any particular methods of instruction? I maintain that any method of teaching is suitable for general education which is designed not to put forward information to be passively accepted by the student, but to stimulate the student to think critically about the material presented. In general, the best kind of course in general education is one in which the student is taught only a part of what he learns; that is, where he begins really to teach himself."

7. Judson R. Butler, "The usual first step, when faculty members tackle this problem cooperatively, is to reexamine and to revise the common goals for general study. All recent educational reforms come from an examination of methods and results in the light of given aims, and a faitn that a sincere effort may lead to the discovery of better ways of doing a job . . . . A periodic critical survey of our wares, our ways and our means is just as necessary in education as it is in industry and government. . . . . In framing a general education program . . . . we must beware of the easy way out . . . . It is such a convenient option, that in order to save rebuilding our courses and the basic pattern of instruction, we should shape a program by a mere re-shuffling of the traditional content, or by a rearrangement of 'liberal arts' courses."

Conclusion

Too often educators are inclined to believe that general education is a "fad". That it has come; it will go; or it has gone! In reality, in one form or another, it has and always will be a part of education. In reality, it is an attempt to keep education in tune with the times; to give it meaning to the student; and to prepare the young for their responsibilities and opportunities.

General educationists are most objective in observing the shortcomings of others. The real test of a program in general education comes from the effective ability to have all faculty and administration concerned with and working to determine what an educated man is, and how to help a student become an educated person.

General education is resisted by faculty, both teacher and administrator, mainly because the concept of "education for all" and not just for the elite, is contrary to that held by "higher education." Too often, it is believed, that such education is reduced to mediocrity so that all can succeed. Obviously, if this were true, then the need of all would not be met if for no other reason than sheer boredom. General education does not imply equal educational opportunity designed at the same level for all.

In an effort to meet the needs of the student in a world of rapidly expanding knowledge the "survey course" geared to a general-special "running account" compromise approach becomes the answer in too many curriculums. The survey course is doomed to failure when it is presented as masses of sequential material with authoritarian answers to questions that students haven't asked. It engenders, as do all such courses, the worst kind of teaching.

The general educationist has been challenged to review his discipline to determine the elements of the subject, the amount to be presented, and the ways it will assist the student in learning self-direction toward attaining a "whole" life. Method and content both play an important role in the teaching process. Discussion, use of teaching devices, technology, and independent study as well as other techniques must be explored.

An educator must be open minded and constantly searching for ways of improving his competency. He well might visit master teachers in his own institution, visit other disciplines, sit in on creative curriculum committees, (even if not a member of the committee), and become aware of good work being done elsewhere at all levels of education.

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The institution and the community have a responsibility to provide adequate financial resources to insure leadership, facilities, proper class size, and an incentive to develop.

Finally the teacher is at his best in the roles of co-discoverer and creator with the student. The teacher needs to develop in the student attitudes of 1) responsibility and self-reliance for his learning; 2) an awareness of his strengths and weaknesses; 3) an understanding of what a college is, what scholarly study is and what it means to have the satisfaction of doing creative and scholarly work.

It is important to remember that students in community colleges are only freshmen and sophomores, and three-fourths of them may never experience higher education beyond the second year. An educator's commitment must be to do the best he can for all students and not for a chosen few.

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